

Summary of the Coherent Breathing Study

“Take a deep breath and calm down.” We have all heard that advice before when upset or angry. But could there actually be something to it? And could we use well known breathing techniques to help staff with workplace stress?

A new study by the Translating Research in Elder Care (TREC) team shows positive results for staff in long-term care (LTC) homes using breathing techniques to alleviate workplace stress. This study is believed to be the first to identify positive associations between a breathing technique called coherent breathing and mental health and quality of work-life for staff in LTC homes.

Coherent breathing involves breathing through the nose deep into the belly slowly and evenly while inhaling to a count of 4, 5 or 6 -- whichever is most comfortable -- and then exhaling slowly and evenly to the same count.

LTC staff need practical ways to manage workplace stress and wellbeing. They work in a high-stress environment, often working short-staffed while dealing with complex residents and increased workloads. The COVID-19 pandemic added to these stressors, as staff had to cope with isolation measures, increased resident deaths, rapidly changing protocols, and fear of catching the highly infectious disease.

To determine whether coherent breathing could help, the TREC team recruited 686 participants -- including care aides, registered nurses, licensed practical nurses and managers -- from 31 LTC homes in Alberta. After teaching participants the coherent breathing technique, TREC gave each participant a schedule for doing the breathing exercise and asked them to complete questionnaires before and after to measure mental health, physical health and quality of work-life outcomes. In total, 254 participants completed the study.

A comparison of the before and after intervention questionnaires showed improvements in stress, psychological distress, anxiety, depression, insomnia and resilience among LTC staff. Participants noted that coherent breathing not only calmed them, it also helped them focus and improved their interactions with LTC residents.

The findings suggest that coherent breathing may be a valuable and straightforward strategy to improve stress and quality of work-life for LTC staff, which could positively affect resident quality of life and care, and that it warrants further study.